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"My justice bleeds – for Thee": The Spiritual Crisis of Some Old Testament Characters in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

ARBEN BUSHGJOKAJ
"Luigj Gurakuqi" University of Shkodra
Sheshi "2 Prilli", Shkoder
Albania

Abstract:

Among the many references and allusions to biblical characters and figures, Emily Dickinson selects a representative group of individuals who stand out in the divinely established system of values, morals, and relationships as recorded in the Bible. This representative group includes characters especially from the Old Testament. They all provide Dickinson with examples, illustrations, or embodiments of artistic, mental, intellectual, or spiritual concerns. They are examples of faith and obedience to God through their lives.

Among the biblical characters referred to in Dickinson's poems, Noah is the oldest in history, apart from Adam. Just like Noah in his great ark, the speaker of the poem is "sending all the Birds away – / And moving into Pod" (l. 4). It is for sure that after so many days in the ark Noah had grown anxious about what would happen. Had God forgotten about him? Since he must have had such thoughts in his mind, he sent his dove out to search for dry land.

To ponder trial, Dickinson revisits the character of Abraham. God had sent trials before, and Abraham had proved obedient and faithful. Now it was time for the great trial, to produce the great grace, and the great man, and to reveal the great God. Moses is the next milestone of the quest of the poet for spiritual significance. In his case, the speaker joins in the disappointment of not getting what one has dreamed of and worked for, for a long time.

Another fascinating figure that comes up in her poems is Elijah. Maybe she liked Elijah because he never experienced physical death, according to Scriptural accounts. He was carried bodily to heaven in "chariot of fire" pulled by "horses of fire". Dickinson liked this idea of not dying. Even if she had to die, it had to be in majestic way, similar to Elijah's transport. A final Old Testament figure to *embody spiritual concerns and crises is David. The bravery and success of this young man becomes the motive for a poem in the nineteenth century in Amherst. Dickinson finds not only inspiration in this account but also a person to compare her strength, bravery and achievement with. All in all, these characters seem to supply Dickinson with substantial nectar for the making of the crux of spiritual experience.*

Key words: Emily Dickinson, Old Testament characters, spiritual crisis.

Dickinson uses the original biblical portraits of Biblical characters to make her own pictures of them, which would match and support her arguments, religious beliefs and ways of reconciling her outer and inner worlds. As the Bible tells us, in their time, these characters faced their own challenges and met with their own difficulties which led to moments of spiritual and emotional crisis. Putting herself and these characters side by side, with the same conclusion about their lives, must have come from some deep disappointment in the lack of appreciation of human values by others around the poet.

Among the biblical characters referred to in Dickinson's poems, Noah is the oldest in history, apart from Adam. Noah lived at a time when the whole earth was filled with violence and corruption. Yet Noah did not allow the evil standards of his day to rob him of his fellowship with God. He stood out as the only one who "walked with God", as was true of his great-grandfather Enoch.[1] Noah was a just and righteous man (cf. Gen. 6:9). The Lord singled Noah out from among all his contemporaries and chose him as the man to accomplish great deeds. He was a hero of faith who obeyed God by building an ark, thus becoming God's "instrument in saving mankind" from

[1] *The King James Version of the Bible*, Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge UP, 1769. All references to the Bible will be from this version unless specified otherwise. From this point onwards, biblical references will appear with the name of the book of the Bible and the respective chapter and verse numbers as in this instance (cf. Gen. 6:9, Gen. 5:22).

total destruction by the Flood.[2]

When the ark was ready, Noah entered with all kinds of animals, "and the Lord shut him in" (Gen. 7:16) and cut him off completely from the rest of mankind. It was a long time of waiting for the redemption through water. This time of waiting and the aftermath of the flood become subject for Emily Dickinson's critique and comments. The poet proves the power of her poetical lines to condense long narratives into a few stanzas. Employing this event and especially Noah as the main acting figure of the biblical account, Dickinson proceeds with the following account of hers:

> The Winters are so short -
> I'm hardly justified
> In sending all the Birds away -
> And moving into Pod -
>
> Myself - for scarcely settled -
> The Phebes have begun -
> And then - it's time to strike my Tent -
> And open House - again -
>
> It's mostly, interruptions -
> My Summer - is despoiled -
> Because there was a Winter - once -
> And all the Cattle - starved -
>
> And so there was a Deluge -
> And swept the World away -
> But Ararat's a Legend - now -
> And no one credits Noah – (P-403)[3]

The first part of the poem is a personalized version of the

[2] Ronald F. Youngblood et al. 1997. *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 380. See also Gen. 5:28–9:29.

[3] Thomas H. Johnson. Ed. 1961. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. All the poems cited or referred to will be from this edition and will be referred to by the number of the poems appearing in this edition unless specified otherwise.

"Deluge" that took place at the time of Noah. The very first line starts with a result of the flood: "The Winters are so short". Before the "Deluge" the earth had a different climate from what followed it. Immediately after the flood, everything had changed. This was the first time that it rained according to the biblical accounts. Rain was not necessary since the earth was watered by the mists that rose out of it (cf. Gen.2:6). The distinction of seasons was made only after the flood.

Just like Noah in his great ark, the speaker of the poem is "sending all the Birds away – / And moving into Pod" (l. 4). It is for sure that after so many days in the ark Noah had grown anxious about what would happen. Had God forgotten about him? Since he must have had such thoughts in his mind, he sent his dove out to search for dry land (cf. Gen. 8: 8-11).

Dickinson, appearing as the speaker in the poem, is "scarcely settled" and her "Summer" is somehow "despoiled – / Because there was a Winter – once" (ll. 10-11). Whatever this winter was, it brought about radical changes. Dickinson seems to have experienced a similar "deluge" during this winter, since her "Cattle starved" (l. 12). In the mixture of the two floods, Noah's and her own, which must have been a bitter experience, one sees the identification of the poet with the old man Noah. This is made even clearer through the terms used in the poem. Most of the key words in the poem above such as, "birds", "Pod", "Tent", "House", "Cattle", are words that are associated with the normal farm and village life that surrounded the poet in Amherst.

Further evidence of the identification of the poet with this important biblical figure can be found in the following poem.

Once more, my now bewildered Dove
Bestirs her puzzled wings
Once more her mistress, on the deep
Her troubled question flings -
Thrice to the floating casement
The Patriarch's bird returned,

Courage! My brave Columba!
There may yet be Land!

(P-48)

It seems like in this poem we have two arks and two heroes; the first Noah and his story, and the other the poet and her own "casement" (l. 5). The first four lines of the poem make an account of the personal story of the poet, and then in the second half she goes back to the old story of "The Patriarch" (l. 6). The language of the first part, which could be a stanza by itself, describes a state of anxiety, doubt, and questioning, of which we do not read in the biblical account. This is shrewdly achieved by the power of the epithets used by the poet such as, "bewildered", "puzzled", and "troubled".

The unstable spiritual and psychological state described by these terms, however, cannot be directly applied to Noah, even though one may not want to skip some probable connections. The state of anxiety and suspense that the mistress is in is also transferred to the "bewildered Dove" with "puzzled wings" (ll. 1-2). The Bible does not say what went on in Noah's mind while he was in the ark. Yet he must have been anxious, concerned, bewildered, puzzled, and sometimes scared. This experience was all fresh and unfamiliar to him. He must have had some moments of wonder, and anxiety, but they were always controlled by his faith and hope in God and His care and salvation.

The poem concludes with optimistic tones. It is one of the numerous recurrences in the poems of Emily Dickinson where the "mistress" joins anybody, in this case "The Patriarch", in a call of faith and hope or a longing yearn for spiritual fulfillment: "Courage! My brave Columba! / There may yet be Land!" (ll. 7-8). The prevailing idea is that in life we all face 'deluges' of different dimensions, but one should try to approach them with optimism and a hope for victory. At the beginning the poet may seem "puzzled", "bewildered", and "troubled", but in the end she joins "The Patriarch,"[4] a termed applied to Noah only by Dickinson, in his optimistic waiting for salvation from the "Deluge".

***

Another biblical figure to capture the attention of the Amherst reclusive poet is Abraham, whose name means *father of a multitude*, originally Abram -- *exalted father*. He was the patriarch upon whom the nation of Israel was established, and was a "primary model of faithfulness for Christianity."[5] The accounts about Abraham are found in Genesis 11:26–25:11, with the biblical writer focusing on several important aspects of his life.

God's command for Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac was a crucial, and as stated by some critics, a cruel test of his faith, and concerning this event in Abraham's life, Emily Dickinson "pinned a prudential moral on the story."[6] He was willing to give up his son in obedience to God, although at the last moment the Lord intervened to save Isaac (cf. Gen. 22:1–13). The Lord's promise of descendants as numerous as the stars of the heavens was once again affirmed as a result of Abraham's unquestioning obedience (cf. Gen. 22:16–18). But Emily Dickinson, a nineteenth-century poet who had anti-traditional church views on religion and God, at least from what is understood from her stance, perceives the whole story in a different way:

[4] The reference to Noah as the "Patriarch" is Dickinson's choice and it is not written anywhere in the Bible that Noah is listed among the patriarchs. However, from the overall perspective of the biblical understanding of the book of Genesis, Noah is a precursor of faith, and the lineage of Christ goes back to Adam, through Noah. Thus, Dickinson's use of the word is technically correct.

[5] Youngblood, c1997: 389.

[6] Richard B. Sewall. 1980. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 699.

Abraham to kill him -
Was distinctly told -
Isaac was an Urchin -
Abraham was old -

Not a hesitation -
Abraham complied -
Flattered by Obeisance
Tyranny demurred -

Isaac - to his children
Lived to tell the tale -
Moral - with a Mastiff
Manners may prevail.

(P-1317)

The traditional explanation of the biblical account attributes everything to God's imperturbable will. But just as to many liberal minds, the story, at first sight, does not seem fair to Emily Dickinson. After all, Abraham had waited for years and decades for this promised son who gave him hope for descendants. Now he is "distinctly told" "to kill him" (ll. 1-2). Matthew Henry in his Commentary on the Bible uses the word *strange* three times related to three major aspects of this event. One is "the strange command which God gave to Abraham" (Gen. 22: 1, 2), the second "Abraham's strange obedience to this command" (Gen. 22: 3–10), and lastly, "the strange issue of this trial."[7] Thus it is not only Emily Dickinson who is amazed, even astounded, at the scene, but most probably many others like her who read that passage from Scripture.

All of this happened "after these things" (Gen. 22: 1), after all the other trials, hardships, and difficulties that Abraham had undergone. Now, perhaps, he was beginning to think the storms were all over; but this hardest of trials, to

[7] Matthew Henry. 1997. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 138.

sacrifice his own son, came upon him. For Emily Dickinson this was probably hard to understand because she, like many other outstanding literary representatives of the epoch, was trying to comprehend God's existence and His ways of dealing with man from a distinctly human point of view, i.e., through logic and reasoning. She found Abraham an extraordinary man, which he turned out to be. But what is the "Moral" (l. 11)? What are the "Manners" (l. 12).[8]

The "Moral" and the "Manners" that should prevail are that virtue is proved through trial, and great and mighty things do not just appear along the way. Sometimes, situations go beyond our control, and things develop in certain ways that it seems as if everyone were a "Mastiff", even God. In the poem above, Emily Dickinson shows her critical view of God and His interactions with man. The words used in the poem speak for themselves. The choice of words matches the core of the poem, which is the poet's antagonistic voice to God's ways of dealing with men, as in the instance of Abraham. The tone of the speaker's voice is serious and fierce, flavoured with elements of irony, as to be seen in line 2 with the depiction of Isaac as an "Urchin". The condensed account of the poet's version of the story goes on employing words like "Flattered" and "Obeisance"(l. 7), "Tyranny demurred" (l. 8), "tale", "Moral", "Manners" and "Mastiff" (ll. 8-10), which show the subtle irony the poet loads the moralistic event in the life of Abraham.

From the human perspective, Abraham had all the reasons to call God a "Mastiff", as Dickinson does, and 'to hesitate' (l. 5) to do what was asked of him. But there is a difference between the poet's view of this trial and the traditional theological interpretation of it. The biblical account starts the story with "after these things", which means that this was not the first encounter of Abraham with God. God had sent other trials before, and Abraham had proved obedient and faithful. Now it was time for the great trial, to produce the

[8] Henry 1997: 141.

great grace, and the great man, and to reveal the great God (cf. Gen. 22:11-17).

People, in general, choose the easiest way to achieve things or to be accepted. With such a perspective, when someone demands of another more commitment and work, which requires more efforts and costs much more, then that person looks like "Tyranny" and a "Mastiff". The results, however, when one is faithful, are always pleasing and the appreciation of the outcome is higher.

* * *

To a certain degree, in the course of the relationships of humans with God, it appears that these relationships are rather hierarchical, where "God usually commands and people obey or are punished."[9] Yet in the poem that follows, Dickinson unfolds another dimension of the human-divine relationship, the intimate. This time, Jacob is the one to bring this dimension into view.

A little East of Jordan,
Evangelists record,
A Gymnast and an Angel
Did wrestle long and hard -

Till morning touching mountain -
And Jacob, waxing strong,
The Angel begged permission
To Breakfast - to return -

Not so, said cunning Jacob!
"I will not let thee go
Except thou bless me" - Stranger!
The which acceded to -

[9] Richard S. Ellis. 2001. "'A little East of Jordan': Human-Divine Encounter in Dickinson and the Hebrew Bible." In *Emily Dickinson at Home,* eds. Gudrun M. Grabher and Martina Antretter, 127. W. Verlag Trier.

Light swung the silver fleeces
"Peniel" Hills beyond,
And the bewildered Gymnast
Found he had worsted God!

(P-59)

The poem quoted above is a Dickinsonian version of the biblical narrative (cf. Gen. 32), with some deletions, paraphrases, new terms and apparently a new approach. As Frye states, Dickinson seems to have found "interest in the character and story of Jacob."[10] The poem starts with "A little East of Jordan". This clarifies the geographical setting of whatever is going to happen. It is interesting to note that Dickinson uses the word "East", which in another version of the poem appears as "over"[11], and the latter is the exact word that is used in the biblical account of the story. Is Dickinson wrong? No, she is not, and what this proves is that Emily Dickinson was not only a reader of the Bible but also a keen student of it. She did not only read the lines as they appear in the Bible, but she could also make the correct geographical connections for the story.

In this poem, Dickinson is distinguished again for her "use of paradox, wordplay, and multiplicity of perspective," to reveal the truths about human-divine relationships. Until now we have seen rather "vertical" relationships, where God is interacting with people from top to bottom, whereas in this poem the relationships fall on a "horizontal axis."[12] Interaction becomes more interdependent. The angel appears to have been dependent upon Jacob and "begged permission" (l. 7) but Jacob says "'I will not let thee go / Except thou bless me' – Stranger"

[10] Northrop Frye. 1963. *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*. N. York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 167.

[11] The word "over" appears as an alternative for "East" in the manuscript of the poem in: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson,* ed. by Thomas H. Johnson, 6th ed. Vol. 1. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP), 1977, p. 44. This includes variant readings critically compared with all the available manuscripts.

[12] Ellis, 124.

(ll. 10-11).

The purpose of Dickinson behind Jacob is to reveal what might have been disguised in the background of the biblical story. A closer reading of the Bible indicates almost, if not exactly, the same thing. God is not an old monarch sitting on a throne, where no one can reach him, or would dare reach him. Dickinson's desire, which is revealed in the poem through Jacob's desire, is to know God on a more personal level. That is the reason behind the fighting. It is mixed with a desire to be blessed, and the bewilderment which associates the end of the struggle.

The condensing of the whole story into sixteen lines provides the grounds for Dickinson's special use of language, like pun or paradox. Lines 7 and 8 are loaded with expression through comic elements. The "Angel" is lowered now in position and has to "beg permission / To Breakfast - to return". The order of power is overthrown. If until now it was Jacob asking for blessings and care from the Divine, now the angel is asking for "permission". The transformation of the image into one where the speaker is the person who bestows the blessing, in this case the permission, provides a picture of the poet who "remained to the end a fighter for her way of poetry."[13]

The story proceeds with Jacob's demand for blessing. A long biblical narrative is shortened to one word in the poem: "Stranger" (l. 4). The account in the Bible tells of an exchange of words between the angel and Jacob. Jacob tells the angel his name, but the angel does not, asking in reply "Wherefore *is* it *that* thou dost ask after my name?" (Gen. 32:29). The angel still remains a "Stranger" for the "Gymnast", but not for the readers of the Bible, or of the poem, since it has already been provided in the first four lines. This adds to Dickinson's peculiarity of quoting from the Bible. As Richard B. Sewall writes in his

[13] William Warren Sweet. 1952. *Religion in the Development of American Culture 1765-1840*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 74.

biographical work, "she almost always clipped down the Biblical rhetoric or used a single word or phrase as shorthand for the original." [14]

After such an encounter with God, Jacob remains "bewildered" (l. 15) even though he is not inexperienced in his relationship and encounters with God (cf. Gen. 28:10–22), he finds it hard to grasp that he has not only seen but also "worsted God" (l. 16) and is still alive. In her constant quest for spiritual fulfillment and meaning in the human-divine relationship; Emily Dickinson finds it appropriate to use this biblical instance to voice her wrestling with God – a "multidimensional relationship", and the private and public struggles in the Connecticut Valley of the nineteenth century, of both the philosophical transcendentalists and the silent, unpublished poetess of Amherst.[15]

***

Moses is another biblical character who becomes the reference of some of Dickinson's poems. Like many other characters of whom Emily Dickinson reads in the "antique Volume" (P 1545), Moses is the next milestone of the quest of the poet for spiritual significance. In his case, the speaker in the following poem joins in the disappointment of not getting what one has dreamed of and worked for, for a long time. The inclination of "identification with Moses" is evidenced by the poem below.[16]

It always felt to me - a wrong
To that Old Moses - done -
To let him see - the Canaan -
Without the entering -

[14] Sewall, 698.
[15] Ellis, 131.
[16] Elisabeth Johnson McGregor. 1981. "Standing with the Prophets and Martyrs: Emily Dickinson's Scriptural Self-defense." *Dickinson Studies* 39: 21.

And tho' in soberer moments -
No Moses there can be
I'm satisfied - the Romance
In point of injury -

Surpasses sharper stated -
Of Stephen - or of Paul -
For these - were only put to death -
While God's adroiter will

On Moses - seemed to fasten
With tantalizing Play
As Boy - should deal with lesser Boy -
To prove ability.

The fault - was doubtless Israel's -
Myself - had banned the Tribes -
And ushered Grand Old Moses
In Pentateuchal Robes

Upon the Broad Possession
'Twas little - But titled Him - to see -
Old Man on Nebo! Late as this -
My justice bleeds - for Thee!

(P-597)

Moses was the man who was appointed by God to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and was their leader and lawgiver during their years of wandering in the wilderness (cf. Ex. 6:18, 20; Num. 26:58–59). Moses was a leader so inspired by God that he was able to build a united nation from a race of oppressed and weary slaves. In the covenant ceremony at Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were given, he founded the religious community known as Israel. As the interpreter of these covenant laws, he was the organizer of the community's religious and civil traditions. His story is told in the Old Testament—in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Towards the end of his life we read about this "wrong – / To that Old Moses – done" (ll. 1-2). Now this "Wounded Deer – leaps highest" (P-165) and is allowed to "scan […] the stately landscape / On the other side" (P-168) – "Canaan / Without the entering" (ll. 3-4). This resonates what one can read in the account about Moses on the mountain (Deut.34:1-4).

In the lines of the poem quoted above, the disappointment of the poet on behalf of Moses is evident, and the tone that prevails in the poem varies from slightly ironic to deeply sarcastic. The many references to Moses that occupy space in the poem help us understand the broader context of the "wrong" (l. 1) that was done to him.

In the text from the Bible we read that Moses was allowed to "see – the Canaan – / Without the entering" (ll. 3-4). Naturally, for most readers of the passage the question arises: Why is God so unfair with Moses? Why all this "wrong?" (l. 1).

In the first and second stanzas Dickinson presents her concern and complaint in very straightforward terms. As the reading moves down through the next lines, the issue is put in comparison and contrast with what happened to two other biblical characters, Stephen and Paul. They were both killed for proclaiming the message of God. But the reason why Dickinson might have employed them here is not because they died but because they "were only put to death" (l. 11), whereas "on Moses" God's will seems to have been "fasten[ed] / With tantalizing Play" (ll. 13-14). The argument of the poet is against God who "As Boy – should deal with lesser Boy" is trying "To prove ability" (ll. 15-16). The simile loaded with sarcastic tones shows the poet's human limitation to comprehend and the reluctance to comply with this God's plan.

Leoffelholz, commenting on Dickinson's poem quoted above, views the image of Moses associated with the idea that "Moses [was] a prefiguration of Christ, in that he was punished for the sin of Israel," but this is not supported by any biblical reference or widely referred commentary on the passage which provides the story.[17] Leoffelholz believes that Dickinson in this poem "criticizes the orthodox Christian interpretive tradition that brings the Old Testament into coherence with the New by treating the Old Testament as the prefiguration of the New, justifying Moses' fate by its prefiguration of Christ's."[18]

If one observes carefully what is said in the passage, it is written that God said to Moses "speak ye unto the rock before their eyes". God always gives very specific instruction about anything he ever asks people to do. The same is true in this case. God wants Moses to "speak unto the rock", but out of a humanly justified wrath, Moses "smote the rock twice". God has intended otherwise. He wants to receive glory in a simpler way: simply by speaking to the rock and giving water to the people, who in turn, are supposed to glorify God for his power.

The poet, and the probably reader also, would have "banned the Tribes - / And ushered Grand Old Moses / In Pentateuchal Robes" (ll. 18-20). The compassion and sympathy of the poet, and maybe even the identification, are revealed in the last line of the final stanza, where the speaker's "justice bleeds" for the "Old Man on Nebo" of the previous lines. The wording of the final stanza, especially the last line, reveals Emily Dickinson's power of language to voice her spiritual and mental state. As Elisabeth Phillips writes, "for Dickinson the strength of the feeling is in the right word."[19] The poem deepens one of her life-long struggles, her quest for the ultimate truth about God and His character, and her concern for the way humans, including herself, are treated in relationship with the Sublime.

Sympathy for Moses is reaffirmed in another poem, where the underlying rhetorical question puts a collection of individuals in the same class with Moses, sharing the same

[17] Mary Loeffelholz. 1991. *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 63.
[18] Ibid., 63.
[19] Elizabeth Phillips. 1988. *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 173.

problem.

Could we stand with that Old "Moses" -
"Canaan" denied -
Scan like him, the stately landscape
On the other side -

(P-168)

This incident has been referred and alluded to many times in poems and especially in Christian hymns. The similarity of form and content between this stanza and Isaac Watts hymnal version is obvious.

Could we but climb where Moses stood,
And view the landscape o'er,
Not Jordan's stream nor death's cold flood
Should fright us from the shore. [20]

Watts' version, however, differs from Dickinson's because it does not question the divine justice. The hymn does not speak of any injustice or "wrong" done to Moses, because it views the God's dealing with Moses from a different perspective, the perspective of unquestioning faith.

For England, this was an example "of miscarriage of justice," [21] but in the analysis of this grouping of the poet, Moses and Ananias in the same poem, Virginia Oliver holds to the idea that the three cases in the poem "represent different moral and ethical problems"[22]and she goes on to say that:

> If the poem is considered a comment or criticism, it may be criticism of human judgment and/or human interpretation and understanding of divine judgment rather than of God himself. The lightness of tone and the absence of

[20] Danolad Davie. ed., 1981. *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*. New York: Oxford UP, 66.

[21] Martha Winburn England. 1984. "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts: Puritan Hymnodists." In *Critical Essays on Emily Dickinson*, edited by Paul J. Ferlazzo. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall & Co., 128.

[22] Virginia Oliver. 1989. *Apocalypse of Green: A Study of Emily Dickinson's Eschatology*. New York: Peter Lang, 40.

> recrimination makes the poem appear less critical of God's ways than of man's understanding of God's ways.[23]

Among all of her references to Moses, Dickinson sometimes feels for him, sometimes joins him in his views, and in other cases identifies with him. The criticism implied in the poetic line (P-1201: l. 5) could be applied to the many Moses-es of her day. She might have been a witness of the lack of appreciation for what people do or are, the lack of the right understanding and interpretation of human-divine or human-human relationships. Bloom argues that the comparison between Moses and Dickinson is relevant, since "the Canaan she would not cross to was poetic recognition while she lived."[24] By means of special language choice, keen observation of situations, and careful and meaningful transformations, she makes her employed figures and especially Moses, part of the mosaic of her life as a human being and as a poet.

*** * ***

In most of the Biblical characters, Emily Dickinson found something to be surprised by or attracted to, to identify or sympathize with. Another fascinating figure that comes up in her poems is Elijah. Maybe she liked Elijah because he never experienced physical death, according to Scriptural accounts. He was carried bodily to heaven in "chariot of fire" pulled by "horses of fire" (2 Kin. 2:1–11). The salvation from physical death was a favour previously bestowed only upon Enoch (cf. Gen. 5:24). Dickinson liked this idea of not dying. Even if she had to die, it had to be in majestic way, similar to Elijah's transport.

Elijah's Wagon knew no thill

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[23] *Ibid.*, 141.

[24] Harold Bloom. Ed. 1985. *Emily Dickinson: Modern Critical Essays*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 5.

Was innocent of Wheel
Elijah's horses as unique
As was his vehicle -

Elijah's journey to portray
Expire with him the skill
Who justified Elijah
In feats inscrutable -

(P-1254)

The event of Elijah's rapture is beyond what the poet can grasp. The whole scene was quite unnatural and beyond human comprehension and description. Dickinson is fascinated by the leisurely way Elijah went. It is a way she constantly dreams of to be hers when she departs from this world. Death struck very often among her friends, relatives and family, and the fear of and uncertainty about it accompanied her all the way to the grave. It was probably for this reason that Emily Dickinson found interest in the way Elijah's earthly life came to an end. Her dream of a unique way of dying is put to paper in the imaginary description of her own majestic death in poem 712.

Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me -
The Carriage held but just Ourselves -
And Immortality.

We slowly drove - He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility – […]

(P-712: ll. 1-8)

Poem 1254 speaks about Elijah's departure as envisioned by the poet, whereas this one pictures the poet's own way of going. When Emily Dickinson drew the sketch of her own death she must have had in her mind "Elijah's Wagon […] / innocent of Wheel" (P 1254, ll.1-2), his "horses as unique / As was his vehicle" and his "journey" (ll. 3-5). The poet's death does not claim to repeat the Biblical account, but it refers to it as an example for imitation, as we see in poem 712, where Dickinson tries to soothe her death pains by viewing it as leisurely as she possibly can. Hers was merely a product of her imagination, and she was comfortable with that, but what astounds her is the case of Elijah. At the end of the first poem, in its last line, there is indication that she admits the human limitation to understand how such a thing could ever happen or be explained in terms to be understood by man. This she calls "feats inscrutable" (P-1254: l.8).

Reference to the sudden and fascinating scene of Elijah's journey to heaven recurs in a poem where the poet introduces an awe-inspiring scene of nature at work. An explosion of similes and metaphors makes the poem seem and sound like a storm itself.

Like Rain it sounded till it curved
And then I knew 'twas Wind -
It walked as wet as any Wave
But swept as dry as sand -
When it had pushed itself away
To some remotest Plain
A coming as of Hosts was heard
It filled the Wells, it pleased the Pools
It warbled in the Road -
It pulled the spigot from the Hills
And let the Floods abroad -
It loosened acres, lifted seas
The sites of Centres stirred
Then like Elijah rode away
Upon a Wheel of Cloud.

(P-1235)[25]

The "Rain", "Wind", "Waves", and the "coming of the Hosts" are followed by a peaceful retreat of nature into its own bosom; the storm "then like Elijah rode away / Upon a Wheel of Cloud". Both situations, the act of nature depicted in this poem and Elijah's departure, share spontaneity, suddenness, and fascination.

It seems that Emily Dickinson was only interested in the way Elijah passed away, but this is not so. At certain moments in her life she finds herself in the same position as Elijah. In a letter to Lavinia, her sister, she wrote, "Like Elijah, I have found friends in the Wilderness."[26] The direct reference takes the reader's attention to the biblical narrative in the First Book of Kings, where one reads that Elijah proclaims God's message but is in danger of his life because of the king's anger (cf. 1 Kings 17:2-10).

In both instances, Elijah made friends in the wilderness, and the poet, just like him, has "found friends" in her "Wilderness". In her life Dickinson proved to be very different from those around her in all respects. Most of her friends and even the family members had joined other circles, which she would not. Some of her friends were converted to Christianity during the revival years in Amherst, some others went away on different missions or on pursuit of their future, but she remained the same Emily, alone in the midst of warfare between the spiritual and intellectual. No one could fully understand her world, since everything she chose or did, or did not do, was uncommon. Yet in the midst of this wilderness Providence had reserved "friends" even for her. These friends were nature, birds, bees, fields, books, papers and writing. In one letter, Dickinson is specific about her friendship with

[25] Biblical references of both poems are from I Kings 17, 18; II Kings 2:1-11, and Ezekiel 1.

[26] Thomas H Johnson. Ed. 1965. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge. Mass.: Harvard UP, Vol 3, letter 433. Letters of Dickinson cited or referred to in this paper will be from this edition and will be referred to by L, then the number of the volume and finally by the number of the letter, as in (*L* III, 433).

nature, especially the birds: "My Breakfast surpasses Elijah's though served by Robins instead of Ravens" (*L*, II, 458). Maybe that is the reason why Dickinson chose to compare herself and her world with Elijah and his wilderness. The uniqueness and uncommonness of their experiences might have drawn the poet closer to the prophet through the images of breakfast, birds, and natural life.

* * *

David is another important representative Biblical figure for Dickinson. David, whose name means *beloved,* was second king of the United Kingdom of Israel, ancestor of Jesus Christ and writer of numerous psalms.[27]

David spent his youth in Bethlehem. The youngest of eight brothers, he was the son of Jesse, a respected citizen of the city. His mother was tenderly remembered for her godliness. As the youngest son, David was the keeper of his father's sheep. In this job he showed courage and faithfulness by killing both a lion and a bear that attacked the flock (See also 1 Sam. 16:10–11; 17:12–14 and Ps. 86:16).

As a young man, he displayed outstanding musical talent with the harp, a fact that figured prominently in his life. When Saul was rejected by God as king, the prophet Samuel went to Bethlehem to anoint David as the future king of Israel. Apparently, there was no public announcement of this event, although David and his father surely must have known what anointing meant.

As referred to in the poem that will follow, Goliath's challenge for an Israelite to do battle with him stirred David's spirit. Weighted with heavy armor, Goliath was equipped to engage in close-range combat. David's strategy was to fight him at a distance. Taking five smooth stones from a brook, David

[27] Youngblood, c1995. The record of David's life is found in 1 Samuel 16–31; 2 Samuel 1–24; 1 Kings 1–2; and 1 Chronicles 10–29.

faced Goliath with only a sling and his unflinching faith in God. Goliath fell, struck by a stone from David's sling. For this feat, he became a hero in the eyes of the nation (cf. 1 Sam. 17:4–51). The bravery and success of this young man becomes the motive for a poem in the nineteenth century in Amherst. Dickinson finds not only inspiration in this account but also a person to compare her strength, bravery and achievement with.

> I took my Power in my Hand -
> And went against the World -
> 'Twas not so much as David - had -
> But I - was twice as bold -
>
> I aimed my Pebble - but Myself
> Was all the one that fell -
> Was it Goliath - was too large -
> Or was myself - too small?

(P-540)

David must have been a strong young man since he had killed a lion and a bear, but it would be hard to believe that he was strong enough to physically defeat such a giant as Goliath. David's power for victory, as he admitted, did not come from him, but from the Lord, as we read in the Scriptural passage (cf. 1 Sam. 17:37, 45)

The difference between the speaker in the poem and David is the source and the extent of their strength, since the speaker says "I took my Power in my Hand" (l. 1) and "'Twas not so much as David – had –" (l. 3). However, one should note the determination and courage of the poet which go beyond that of the Biblical hero, the former being "twice as bold" (l. 4). The beginning of the poem introduces a more promising scene than that of young David. The poet has chosen "Power" to be her weapon, whereas the young Israelite had chosen a sling-shot and five stones which in the eyes of the armies was useless, even more so for the giant ahead of him, who ridicules David for choosing such a combat technique as if he is going to fight "a dog" (1 Sam. 17:43). Yet the speaker does not remove herself far from David since, as she says in line 4, she "aimed the Pebble", which is a point of contact between the two.

Whatever else this "World" was that the poet "went against" in line 2, it was strong and tough. The aftermath of the battle finds her somewhere in a corner reflecting upon the results, which were different from David's glorious triumph over Goliath, and consequently over the whole army of the Philistines. She "Was all the one that fell", and after a few moments of thought and consideration she gives two alternative reasons for her failure. The first is that maybe "Goliath – was too large", and the second that she herself was "too small" to defeat such a giant.

One possible application of this failed attempt for victory is that she "went against" the trend of society, literature and religion. At certain moments in her life, however, she may have pondered the reclusiveness or silence that dominated her world, and more so the misunderstanding of her voice and personae. This must have seemed like a fall or a failure, something similar to what happened to Goliath. To match this intention she chose an appropriate figure, like David, to identify with, but producing the opposite results, maybe on purpose.

This poem invites a twofold discussion. One aspect can be the enormity of the problems that people face and the wars they have to fight in life. In this instance, Dickinson is fighting a more modern and highly sophisticated enemy, an apparently "too large" Goliath – "the World" (ll.2, 7). The other aspect could be the identification of Dickinson with David, putting herself in the same battlefront, even though they differ in strength and courage, since Dickinson does not have as much "Power" as David did, yet she "was twice as bold" (ll.1,3).

The figure of Goliath in this context stands for the "World," the opposing side in the life of Emily Dickinson. That she "went against the World" does not need any support from the analysis of the poems, since her biographical data, even though limited, makes it definitely clear. This enemy seems to be "too large" for her. She has the courage and gathers all of her powers, but surprisingly, in the end, she "was all the one that fell" (l. 6).

Her "Goliath" was "too large", which means her battle must have been tough, and sometimes even disappointing. She admits her limitation in strength and size, the latter at the end of the poem, but does not feel inferior concerning her courage and bravery to face the world. The speaker tried, and even if she "fell", it was not because she never had the boldness for it, but either because she was too small, or the enemy was too large. The image of opposition and resistance reappears in Dickinson's poems but through different venues of expression.

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The analysis of the poems containing references to the Old Testament characters shows the practical values that the poet embodied in her poetical depictions. For Dickinson, Biblical history does not create a gap between people who live in different epochs. Ancient sources can be an inspiration and instructive learning for future generations. Conversely, readers can look back into history and find figures with whom they can identify. The faith, obedience, and dedication of patriarchs like Noah, Abraham and others followers uphold both admirable and high virtues for the poet, but unfortunately are unattainable in her quest for the truth.

Sometimes, the poet sympathizes with some and feels the disappointment of other biblical characters, who, for unknown reasons, have to suffer and are deprived of certain blessings. However, she craves their hope for a bright future to shine even on her dark road of life. The artist finds applicable aspect in the lives of Moses, Elijah and David, in comparison and in contrast that relate well to the various crises that one faces in life, family and society.

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